

# Returning to the Ranks: Towards an Holistic Career Path in Academic Librarianship

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## Abstract

Having the policies and procedures for individuals to easily move into and out of term limited administrative positions supports an holistic view of an academic career path. While this is normative for our academic colleagues it is less common for academic librarians. Typically librarians in administrative positions (Chief Librarians for example) either stay in those roles, seek other similar roles, or retire from those roles. Returning to the ranks is surprising rare and not well enabled through transparent processes. This paper explores the experiences of four Chief Librarians who returned to the ranks following term appointments. It examines the issues arising from this and makes recommendations on how to improve the situation. The conclusions offer advice for universities, libraries, and librarian administrators.

## Keywords

academic librarianship; employment conditions; administration; term appointments; chief librarians; academic status

## Introduction

Unlike our academic colleagues, librarians have limited traditions and policies which support those in administrative roles returning to the ranks following their term appointments. Typically an administrative appointment is a permanent exit from the front line profession. Administrative librarians either stay in the role, move to another administrative appointment or retire. This is especially true for the most senior position, the Chief Librarian (or University Librarian or the Library Dean).

Our academic colleagues in other disciplines have a more options, policies and career trajectories that enable them to move into and out of administrative appointments

allowing them to be both effective administrators and academic faculty. A more holistic career path for librarians would see administrative appointments as part of a natural and cyclical progression; a stage not a destination.

However, this is currently not the case. Why is returning to the ranks rarely done and what are the obstacles to doing it? What are the experiences of those who have returned to the ranks following an administrative role? And finally, what needs to change in order to facilitate a career cycle more typical of other academics?

The lack of a full academic career cycle creates a separation between librarians and their colleagues in administration appointments. The result has been tensions and suspicions which are unhealthy for academic librarianship. It fuels the belief that management and administrative roles are to be avoided, even scorned. It creates career paths that diverge at a certain point and never, or rarely, re-integrate. And finally, this situation fundamentally misunderstands the nature of management and leadership in contemporary organizations. It reinforces the old and discarded notion that leadership resides in positions and those positions are the most senior in the organization.

This paper explores returning to the ranks by examining the recent experiences of four Canadian Chief Librarians who stepped down from their senior administrative role and stayed in their respective libraries in a professional role. These individuals (one of whom is myself) made this choice voluntarily and three of the four as of May 2014 are still working in these roles. In order to allow these individuals to be frank and forthcoming about their experiences I have kept their identities confidential. The observations throughout draw from their experiences and feedback.

## **Term Appointments**

We have arrived at this state in part because academic status for librarians is relatively new. Even now the status of librarians across Canada is mixed. Some are full colleagues, others have parallel but different rights and responsibilities, still others have staff roles but with some elements of academic status, and finally some, notably in Quebec but in other places as well, are still staff quite separate from the faculty in terms of employment conditions. It follows to a certain extent that the status of librarians on campus reflects upon the status of the senior library administrator, and this has an impact on HR policy.

The University of Guelph is a useful example of how mixed conditions can occur. Librarians at Guelph have had true faculty status since the 1970s. A number of librarians have served as Chair of the Faculty Association and currently a librarian serves as the Chair of the Negotiating Committee. They share an employment contract with faculty, have the equivalent of tenure, and have clear academic as well as professional responsibilities and obligations. However, in 1995 when I arrived as Chief Librarian, the senior role was a permanent appointment not a term appointment unlike my peers around the academic administration tables.

This mismatch was problematic and soon after I started I requested that my position be converted into a term appointment, matching those of the Deans, the Associate Vice

Presidents, and the Vice Presidents. I stepped down as Chief Librarian in 2012 because my second term was over and I did not wish to seek a third term (an open search is required after two terms). While giving up a permanent appointment and moving to a term appointment may not seem in my best interests, it was important that the Chief Librarian be, and be seen to be, on the same basis as the other academic administrators. This was not symbolic decision, it recognized the dominant academic culture and how it affected relationships and decision-making.

Many Chief Librarians still hold permanent appointments. However, even where term appointments are the norm, there is still a lack of policy, procedures or expectations that a Chief Librarian could return to the ranks in a role and set of responsibilities that are suitable, achievable, and valuable to both the library and the university. One of the most unfortunate outcomes of this situation is that many Chief Librarians remain in their positions until they retire. The problem here is not that these folks are not effective and contributing in these roles just that not **all** of them are effective and contributing. Some, frankly, are simply counting the months (or years) until their retirement. In the meantime their leadership engagement has long since waned. As a result these organizations can become stagnant and atrophy, and staff can become quite bitter. Waiting for the Chief Librarian to retire before a new direction can be taken is not effective succession planning.

Of course, term appointments have some negative impacts. They can lead to revolving doors and short term thinking. Second terms can be viewed as "lame duck" periods where few major initiatives are possible. Staff can be resistant to change knowing that the term will end and they will start afresh with a new person. However, this is the model we use for other academic administrators and on balance it has served the institution well if not perfectly.

## **Professional De-skilling and Appropriate Roles**

A significant concern about moving into management roles, particularly the most senior role, is that of professional de-skilling. The focus of the senior role is intense; Chief Librarian roles are complex and university administration is all encompassing. While these are very exciting roles with tremendous rewards, they are demanding. They are also increasingly more about university administration than they are about library administration. While the Chief Librarian advocates for the library and librarians, they are also often someone who sees more clearly, or sees with less bias, the larger university picture. As a result Chief Librarians are objective actors who are regularly called upon for broader involvement in university affairs. All this is just to suggest that the role is comprehensive and tends to push out any focus on engagement with professional activities (i.e. the disciplinary work of being a librarian).

This is, however, not generally true of our academic colleagues. Again, to use personal examples, the current Provost at Guelph, Maureen Mancuso, and the current President, Alastair Summerlee, are recent 3M Teaching Awards winners. Both maintain active teaching roles and Summerlee has a robust and successful research program. A former Provost, Iain Campbell was an internationally respected researcher who maintained an

active research program during his entire time in the role and has returned to the ranks only to further extend his research reputation.

Some Chief Librarians teach in library schools (where that is possible), some write articles or give lectures, a very few continue to do research, and even fewer still continue professional tasks like collections or technology work. For the most part Chief Librarians become full time, exclusive administrators.

But what roles should a librarian who has completed their appointment go back to? Many of these people will tell you, as will I, that they are no longer able to serve on a reference desk, catalogue anything, or understand the collections needs of specific academic departments. And neither does it serve the library or the university to ask them to do any of these things. The challenge is not to define a cookie cutter expectation of returning to a predetermined role and nor is it creating a unique, and perhaps unnecessary, job because of the need to accommodate this person and they don't seem to have any viable skills outside administration. The proliferation of "Special Assistant to the Provost" or similar roles emerged largely because organizations didn't know what to do with academic administrators stepping down and those administrators didn't know either. They had lost, some time ago perhaps, their professional status, and now they had lost their administrative status as well.

Returning to the ranks does not always mean returning to the Library just as other academic administrators do not necessarily return to their academic department. While creating a special role for the sole purpose of keeping someone busy because you have an employment obligation is very undesirable, often former Chief Librarians have unique and valuable skill sets which can be exploited. Such was the case with one individual. At the time of their return issues of records management, recent privacy legislation, and institutional policy were at the forefront of campus discussions. This individual was well suited to implement a new unit that would respond to these new requirements.

While outside of the Library, this role was related to the professional and administrative expertise of the individual and allowed them to work with their library colleagues as a peer. Having such a role available upon returning to the rank is obviously not assured. In this case timing and need intersected but it was more about luck than planning. However, the individual thrived in the position and provided a valuable contribution to the university.

## **Relationships with Professional Colleagues**

It can be difficult to become a "colleague" having been the "boss." One of those interviewed specifically asked to be located, upon their return, to one of the regional campuses and not the central campus. It was important for this person to create a physical distance between themselves and the new Chief Librarian. This was in part a desire to minimize any perceived interference and also to allow the former Chief Librarian to establish a new identity as a professional.

However, as many of those interviewed noted, staff remember that you were once "the boss" and had exercised considerable authority over their professional lives. You might

have made performance or disciplinary decisions in the past that would affect professional relationships in the present and future. In fact, concerns about future consequences regarding collegial relationships might even cause incumbents to temper their actions or decisions.

Having stepped down from their administrative positions, some were cautious about voicing their opinion about contentious issues because they felt it compromised the role of the Chief Librarian or it implied access to confidential information. As a result they often withheld their expertise, a situation which is personally unsatisfying and likely a detriment to the library.

As long as returning to the ranks is not normative, there will remain an unease about how the former administrator is viewed by their new peers, and how colleagues will choose to engage with each other.

## **Compensation**

If there is an expectation that a Chief Librarian will return to the ranks, then an appropriate compensation policy must be in place. The absence of such a policy can make it very difficult to transition compensation such that it reflects a new set of responsibilities and also acknowledges seniority and expertise.

Depending on the compensation practices or policies, a former Chief Librarian might be an expensive salary line. Policies need to be established that provide compensation that attracts candidates to the administrative position and ensures competitive salaries afterwards. However, this puts pressure on the library and also may complicate an individual's collegial relationships later if the compensation after the term is disproportionately large.

In one case the salary line for the former Chief Librarian resided in the office of the Vice President, not the Library. While this insulated the Library from a large salary obligation, it was also the case that when this librarian left or retired, the position and the salary disappeared. This was a bridging strategy that provided a short term solution not a long term resource.

In other cases the administrative role was compensated with a stipend which could be removed when the term ended. As long as the base salary remained aligned with base librarian salaries (e.g. ATB increases, merit) then returning to the ranks required only a transparent adjustment. It was noted in one case however, that senior administrators took a voluntary pay freezes to acknowledge financial constraints while librarians (and faculty) did not. The result was a significant differential between the base salaries of administrators and those of faculty or librarians. Additional adjustments were necessary to resolve this inequity.

## **Planning Ahead**

Of the four individuals discussed, one person was unique in being very clear from the beginning of their first term as Chief Librarian that they would at some point return to the ranks. As a result they were planning their exit and professional future throughout their administrative career.

It was important to them that they not "stay too long" in the administrative role. This is a sentiment shared by others. Too many had seen effective leaders and administrators gradually lose their enthusiasm and commitment. They became jaded or disengagement, and it was clear that they had abdicated their responsibilities but not their position.

As Chief Librarians are hired earlier in their careers (i.e. they are younger) the time to retirement increases, and sustaining productive employment becomes more of an issue. Without term appointments and adequate policies for post-administrative roles, this situation could result in long term appointments that reflect the negative consequences noted before. Coupled with the demise of mandatory retirement, this situation could certainly create barriers for career paths for others as these positions might be "locked up" for many years.

Because this individual knew they were returning to the ranks from the beginning (they served two full terms), they purposefully maintained an active interest and involvement in the work central to their professional expertise. As a result this allowed them to take on a role in government documents and information policy that directly corresponded to their core interests and expertise at the end of their final term. That such a role was available was fortuitous. It is possible that the Library might have had other plans for the role (e.g. a new external hire or an internal opportunity). However, in this case, employment obligations and appropriate expertise aligned favourably.

## **Transition Leave**

While all the individuals involved had access to transition leave, the time periods varied greatly (from 1 to 2 years, or in one case, just 6 months, even though Deans in that institution get a 1 year transition leave). In all situations this leave was viewed as essential in making the transition back into a professional role. Despite trying to remain current in their field, all expressed a concern that the field had changed in significant ways. Even with transition leave it is possible that some will simply be unable to re-tool or catch up.

## **Relationship with the New Chief Librarian**

How does the former Chief Librarian interact with the new Chief Librarian? On one hand the former Chief Librarian is now simply another librarian in the professional complement. On the other hand, they have knowledge and awareness, often at a deep and personal level, that the two share and have concerns about.

In one of the cases examined the new Chief Librarian deliberately sought out advice from the former Chief Librarian knowing that this would be helpful but also problematic.

The two required a protocol (or understanding) about how to discuss (or avoid) confidential or sensitive information. This was especially true about anything regarding union-management issues or previous cases involving disciplinary action. There is a danger that the relationship is seen by others as somehow special with preferential access to information or insights. The former Chief Librarian must maintain collegial relationships with their professional peers while still providing assistance to the new Chief Librarian if that is requested.

There is also the danger of assuming that your previous experience as Chief Librarian is relevant to the current situation. The temptation to say "If I was still the Chief Librarian I would have done ....." could clearly undermine the authority or credibility of the incumbent. As a result the former Chief Librarian has a responsibility to support the new Chief Librarian in a way that is very different than their colleagues. In other words, the former Chief Librarian holds some power and influence, and must exercise it thoughtfully and ethically. In some cases this might be viewed (or felt) as withholding expertise. In other cases it is simply recognizing the special obligations or responsibilities of the role.

## **Returning to the Union**

An interesting adjustment that is a feature of returning to the ranks is returning to (or joining for the first time) the union. Often library administrators have been out of scope for many years. While I would characterize my relations with faculty unions during my administrative roles as cordial and productive, it is taking some time to see things "from the other side." Being part of "management" provides a different, and I would say, more holistic view of the institution and its challenges. In particular, as Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chief Librarian, I was involved in the work of nearly all academic and administrative areas. The union, as is its mandate, takes a more focused view of the academy; a view centered on faculty and their employment rights and obligations.

At this stage (5 months as a union member again) I am still uncomfortable with the strident position my union takes on issues that I see in a more nuanced way. I wrestle with the tension between shared governance and collective bargaining, and I certainly cannot accept the general rhetoric that characterizes senior administrators as uncaring and manipulative. Whether this means my administrative roles have co-opted me or I simply have a deeper insight into the workings of a university is a matter for others to decide. The point may simply be that having administrators return to the ranks and work within the union may bring a broader view of the university, its challenges and opportunities.

## **Negotiating the Reentry**

Where little or no policy exists regarding a return to the ranks, the reentry process is often a negotiation between the individual and the Provost. Not only does this introduce variable practices over time and succeeds (or not) based on the relationship between the two, it also effectively removes the Library from outcomes that directly impact it. This model tends to respect administrative allegiances and isolates the Library from planning.

In one case the return was a multi way negotiation among the Library, the Provost, an academic program, and the individual. The benefits and drawbacks have openly discussed and assessed. Personal as well as institutional interests were considered.

Where advance consideration has afforded a return through documented policy or practice, the individuals can have a more open and transparent process which involves the Library in the outcomes. Effective policy is the foundation for effective planning and financial management.

## **Recommendations**

What needs to change to make moving in and out of senior administrator roles more palatable and effective?

From the university perspective, I would agree that all librarians should have true faculty status and that all Chief Librarians have academic appointments with term limits. This creates alignment with academic administrators and invokes human resource policies which support librarians in the same way as academics are supported. In addition, budgets need to be constructed such that complement and financial issues do not preclude a Chief Librarian returning the ranks. For example, compensation should be based on a base salary plus an administrative stipend such that it can be easily adjusted following the term. Transition leave is key to providing time for adjustments and reentry. Finally, policies and options regarding a return to the ranks should be known to administrative candidates prior to their appointment.

From the library perspective, it is essential that long term planning include the possibility that the Chief Librarian will require an appropriate position following their term and that their skills will need to be matched with opportunities. This also means that when a Chief Librarian is hired, search committees and the search process recognize that they are hiring an academic colleague as well as an administrator. Clearly the size of the library has an affect. Larger libraries likely have more flexibility to accommodate a former Chief Librarian; smaller libraries might struggle with more limited options. In the latter case, the returning librarian might be more a burden than a resource and might create more resentment among colleagues as opportunities are more limited.

There are implications for the individual as well. The incumbent Chief Librarian, anticipating the end of their term, should maintain a professional profile, keep up disciplinary interests, and pursue to some extent their research or teaching engagement. All academic librarians, whether administrators or not, are "scholar practitioners." Maintaining both those roles is the balance we all face in our work.

## **Conclusion**

All those interviewed expressed a genuine desire to contribute, and not merely drift into retirement, following the end of their administrative terms. One echoed Sheryl Sandberg's advice given as part of her TED talk: "Don't leave before you leave." The end of their administrative career was not the end of their professional career.

Despite the fact that in all four cases the individuals were able to return to the ranks in a manner that was beneficial to them, the libraries and the universities, none of them were guided and supported by a comprehensive body of existing policies or procedures. In each case the processes and negotiations were unique and established for the specific instance. On one level this is appropriate. The circumstances of each administrative appointment is different and the solutions should reflect this. On the other hand, having advance knowledge and expectations of how the transition will occur would make the process less arbitrary and perhaps encourage others to enter management or administration.

There has been a recent trend revealing significant difficulties in hiring Associate Chief Librarians and Managers. Current employment and promotion policies offer few incentives for moving into management and administration. Librarians can progress through the ranks with satisfactory compensation and none of the perceived problems of management roles. A more supportive policy and reward structure that facilitates returning to the ranks might encourage librarians to explore management and administrative roles without feeling that they are somehow "leaving the profession."

The more librarians, libraries, and their institutions view the role of the Chief Librarian (or any administrative appointment) as a stage not a final destination, the more academic librarianship will resemble our academic colleagues and their career traditions. In doing so librarians will view moving into and out of administrative roles as part of a normal career path. The result will be a more holistic view of the profession and of the important and diverse roles within it.